



Oceans. Collections. Reflections.
George Nuku
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Gallery texts

By George Nuku

Te Moananui

The Big Blue

This is what the peoples of Oceania call the Pacific. Another honorific meaning translates as “the great engulfing ocean”. Both of these descriptions attest to the *Mana*: the power and authority of this body of water that covers one third of the planet’s surface.

This is evident in the importance of the *Waka* (canoe) to the world of Oceania. Literally starships built without nails, these voyaging craft have permitted humans to extend their migration from the shores of southeast Asia eastwards to the coast of South America. The three *Waka* in this room represent the past, present, and future: one comprised of customary materials, one from a fusion of old and new, and one made entirely from the ever-present plastic.

Life-sized carved depictions of ancestors from the different branches of the Oceanic family are represented also, wearing and wielding treasures of the past that are held in the museum’s collection.

The treated lithographs and paintings counter-balance the contemporary illustrations depicting marine animals in the form of guardians.



The life-sized sculptures suspended above are patterned with *Moko*, the tattoo markings that acknowledge their respective authority. Their inclusion in the *Te Moananui* both exemplifies and reinforces the relationship between culture and nature.

Hunters and Collectors

This room takes the theme of a nineteenth-century study room. In a sense, it pays homage to the voyages of the Novara expedition, its crew, and the powers behind this extraordinary feat of global exploration in the name of science.

The room delves into both investigating and recognizing the works of Ferdinand von Hochstetter, the naturalist and geologist who accompanied the voyage. His forays during the New Zealand leg of the expedition are of particular interest. Another Austrian naturalist, Andreas Reischek, is also featured. His collecting methods are still a subject of current debate among Māori.

The style of the heavy, gilded frames mounted on red walls elevates the voyage prints to the status of classical art.

Te Aonehehe

The Natural World

This room is devoted entirely to Aotearoa (New Zealand). The philosophies shown convey the inseparable link between culture and nature – in this case, the Māori world view.

The links themselves are based entirely on *Whakapapa* (genealogy). This is strongly conveyed in the ancestral house, represented by its ridge, which is realized as human vertebrae with corresponding ribs terminating in the ancestors shown. Each of the ancestors is adorned and wields precious *Taonga* (treasures) from the Weltmuseum Wien collection, supplemented by works of the artist.

The walls themselves are adorned with sculptural elements of New Zealand natural history presented here as *Kaitiaki* (guardians).

Voyage prints and paintings from the Natural History Museum Vienna add yet another layer.



Intrepid Voyagers

Presented in the theme of ivory and gold, this room celebrates the journey of two Māori men, Wiremu Toetoe Tumohe and Hemara Te Rerehau, who visited Vienna in 1858/59. They travelled in order to seek knowledge and gain further insights into the European world and mindset.

Their stay in Vienna was celebrated widely in the Austrian press, culminating in a personal audience with the emperor and his gift of a working printing press on behalf of the empire. The backdrop to this remarkable visit was that the tribal confederation, which Toetoe and Rerehau belonged to, was on the brink of invasion by the British Empire.

The printing press they brought back became a key component in the confederation's media effort to highlight the unjust nature of the invasion both to other tribes and to the world at large. This is indeed very relevant to our times.

This room presents the various persons involved in this story, intending to give a stage to this remarkable moment in history.

Te Rarohenga

The Underworld

This room conveys different themes on many levels. *Te Rarohenga* is the Māori term and description of the underworld, it is a place of cultured behaviour.

Te Rarohenga is the home of a people from whence the origin of *Ta Moko* (Māori tattoo) and *Taniko* (a unique form of weaving) was brought up into the surface world. Brought from below by Mataora and Niwareka, these artforms are considered husband and wife.

The relationship between past, present, and future is conveyed by the representation of *Moko* as worn by deceased ancestors, the *Moko* as worn by the artist and his immediate family and friends, and a future pattern as contemplated by a relative of the artist who will wear the sacred markings into the future.

This room is also a metaphor for the womb and for the cosmos, represented here by the dark surroundings. The gestation and subsequent birth/rebirth-life/death are shown to help the audience towards inner reflection.



Te Ao Marama

The World of Light

The white colour theme of this room conveys the passage of birth from the womb – as presented in the previous, black room – into the light of day.

This room is essentially a summation of all the themes, ideas, and expressions shown in this exhibition. It is serious and light at the same time, taking the audience forward from the deeper, inner, contemplative aspects of the previous rooms and encouraging an outwardly reaction to move towards a form of resolution of self, others, and the world at large.

Säulenhalle

Mate Urutā

Pandemic

The installation is created from carved transparent Plexiglas spheres. The plastic bottles represent the urgent need to responsibly manage our relationship with the environment. The pandemic can be seen as the result of human pressure upon nature. Recycling plastics is one of the positive steps we are implementing.